Planning For Your Assignment

This workshop will:

- Identify what ‘planning’ means when tackling an assignment and its impact on marks
- Examine the planning process, where a plan fits and when to do it
- Offer some practical strategies and examples for the planning stage of writing.

Teaching points:

1. The difference between planning an assignment and an assignment plan
2. The benefits of planning and an assignment plan on your marks
3. Tips to help with the planning process
1. The difference between planning an assignment and an assignment plan

Many students have difficulty understanding the difference between planning and a plan. Practical examples will help before definitions are given.

The **planning** of a birthday party includes:

1. Choosing a date
2. Booking a venue
3. Order the DJ
4. Ordering invitations
5. Writing and sending invitations
6. Ordering catering
7. Ordering a cake
8. Shopping for new clothes
9. Picking up the cake
10. Decorating the venue

Sometimes tasks overlap but this gives you a general idea.

The **plan** for ordering the catering is:

1. Checking the invitation replies to work out number of guest coming and arrange any dietary requirements.
2. Desk-top, telephone and face-to-face research to choose a caterer
3. Check caterer is available on date required
4. Choose food to have on the night
5. Confirm price of food

**TALKING POINT**

Let’s do the planning for a wedding together using the white board.

And the plan for...........would be....? How would you order this task?

**Activity 1:** Assignment planning and developing a plan

With a neighbour or in a small group, discuss your planning for a successful assignment. Jot down the planning process in the space below. Create a plan from one of these tasks. Discuss your planning and plan with the broader group.
Planning space:

Plan space:
This **planning process** for a successful assignment is represented by the graphic:

1. **Analysis:** work out what the question or task is asking you as this will help you to decide your stance. It will also help with your research and outline plan for the assignment. Is the assignment question/task asking you to be descriptive or analytical? What are the key words?
2. **Your notes:** remind yourself of the subject area using your lecture notes and any other class handouts or information. Do you have any gaps in your knowledge or understanding?
3. **Research:** this will fill the gaps, and provide ideas and evidence to support your argument.
4. **Organise:** what theory or practice goes with what aspect and what evidence?
5. **Key points:** what is your bank of notes telling you are the important and significant points to cover?
6. **Map/plan:** put together a tentative outline of the main sections and order of your assignment. You can always amend it later.
7. **Write your first draft:** more ideas may come from writing so....
8. **Revise and edit:** to ensure your subject matter is relevant to the question/task and the order makes sense. Do a ‘reverse outline’ by making short notes by the side of each paragraph or section and check you are answering the question and it flows well from one subject to the next.
9. **Proofread:** check your format, spelling, grammar, and punctuation as it is easy to lose marks here.

**Note:** the **assignment plan (structure)** is in there but is part of the process.
You start planning and assignment right from the point you start thinking. Starting to analyse the assignment or task is part of the planning process, as you are already asking certain questions which will influence what and how you will collect and record information.

So we come to definitions:

**Planning** is a process involving many stages which include the development of an assignment plan. Writing is a part of the process too. Every student has their own way of planning; even if they say they don’t, they do.

An assignment plan is a stage in the planning process. It is a *conscious ordering* of your research material and notes into a coherent structure so your marker can follow your argument.

### 2. The benefits of planning and an assignment plan on your marks

We will now consider the benefits of assignment planning, and having a plan.

**Activity 2: Benefits**

In pairs or small groups, discuss what benefits there are to assignment planning and having an assignment plan. Jot down your ideas in the grid below. You’ve been given one benefit for each to get you started.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning</th>
<th>A plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enables me to think clearly and engenders confidence</td>
<td>Have a plan to take to tutor for feedback</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But are assignment planning and plans really worth it? It’s all very well for me to inform you of the benefits but what do markers think?
**Activity 3: What markers think is important**

A study by Norton (1990) identified a range of assessment criteria and asked staff to rank these in order of importance. In pairs or small groups, assess the marking criteria you think is most important as 1, second most important 2, and so on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear structure and organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Answering the question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accurate use of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Effective presentation and style: the assignment looks appealing and is written with an identifiable style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Understanding of the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wide reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Relevant information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Clear point of view or ‘argument’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation (evaluated the research evidence)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Norton (1990)

The top 5 criteria can all be traced back to the planning process. Don’t believe me? Have a look at the answers at the back.

**3. Tips and hints for planning your assignment**

- **Plan your time** by putting together a timetable and write ‘to do today’ lists. Being organised with your time will give you confidence and you will feel great when you’ve ‘ticked off’ a task or stage you’ve allocated to do.

  It is not planning to deadlines...  
  It’s planning from a deadline – working backwards from it.
Beware of doing too much planning, and not enough doing!

Work when you work best to get the best out of yourself. If you are a night owl, plan your hours from the afternoon onwards until late; if you are up with the lark, plan to start work from early morning and finish late afternoon/early evening.

Develop your argument as early as possible to give focus to the case you are making, and to be able to map out your assignment. Deciding whether you agree or disagree with a perspective will enable you to draw up an assignment plan. This could be a mind map, concept map, diagram, flow chart, whatever suits you. Bullet pointed lists may help, and try giving each of your key topics a colour and then colour-code your notes with the same colour, so you can find all the relevant information easily.

If you would like help with structuring your assignment, we run a workshop on this subject. Simply visit our website for times.

References


Answers

Activity 2: Benefits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Planning</th>
<th>A plan</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enables me to think clearly and engenders confidence</td>
<td>Have a plan to take to tutor for feedback</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can manage time better as can allocate time to each bit (work backwards)</td>
<td>How to start and where everything goes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easy to pick up where left off</td>
<td>Makes writing easier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Easy to pick up where left off</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Activity 3: What markers think is important

<table>
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<th>Criteria</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Clear structure and organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Answering the question</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Accurate use of English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Effective presentation and style: the assignment looks appealing and is written with an identifiable style</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Understanding of the subject</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Wide reading</td>
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1Answering the question – analysing the question to break down exactly what is required of you will mean you provide the answers the markers are looking for (Stage 1 of the process)

2Understanding of the subject – identifying gaps in your notes and filling those gaps with research followed by organising all your notes will help you identify the key points in the subject (Stages 2-5 of the process)
3 Clear point of view or ‘argument’ – when you know what is being asked of you, you can make a decision on your stance, whatever it may be. This will then be developed into your map or plan (Stages 1 and 6)

4 Relevant information – This links to ‘understanding of the subject’ as you need to match the key points with relevant evidence (Stage 5)

5 Clear structure and organisation – It does exactly what it says on the tin (Stage 6)